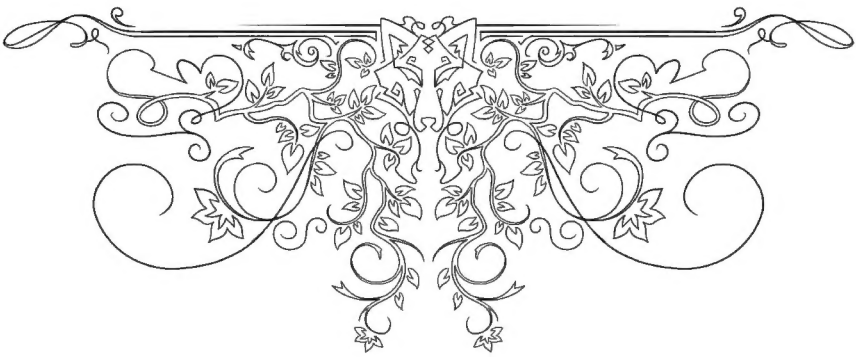

CHAPTER 1

Someone had rewritten the history of Conviction Woods, the cursed forest I called home. Despite all the texts describing Conviction Woods as eternally inhabitable, there were hundreds of wartime artifacts scattered amongst the forest's grounds. The records had been altered to hide the truth of Gardian's last war, a truth that allowed the Woods to protect those mysteriously meant to survive beyond its boundaries.

I lingered on the edge of the farthest northern reach of Conviction Woods. Before me stood a crumbled and dilapidated stone arch, old runic etched across its surface, worn away by the structure returning to the earth. A few fallen stones lay scattered across the surrounding ground, freezing into the dirt as ancient remnants conjoined with snow and soil. Beyond the arch's gaping mouth laid Assiduous's barren territory.

Assiduous's barren territory, and its occupants who didn't want me meandering on their land. It was too late for me to trace the rest of the runic on the arch. I'd only recorded the lower carvings, my arms too short to reach the tallest stones. I let my eyes linger on the writing to try to memorize the patterns. The clock ticked as enemies neared, and while my feet drew me away from the arch, my mind bent around the writing.

The arch's inscriptions must've been centuries old. I'd never, in any of my studies, seen a combination of Union languages on an artifact. Mixing two Union languages was almost unfathomable to modern-day society; besides our common tongue, Gardian prioritized the separation of the four Unions—Conviction, Assiduous, Autarchic, Societal—in their own societies and territories. Even more intriguing, the arch dated back to a war where Conviction and Assiduous were enemies; a combination of the two languages was further proof that Gardian's recorded history was wrong.

I had spent months scouring over records, libraries, and books to pinpoint the location of the arch as soon as I spotted it mentioned in a 300-year-old document. My research eventually revealed that the arch was placed in Assidian territory on the edges of the Woods at the border, though that could've spanned hundreds of miles from the eastern part of the Hub, Gardian's shared centralized city, to the coastline of the continent. To trace the steps of ancient battles to the coordinates of the arch was a tedious process requiring my nose to be stuck in at least two dozen scrolls within the past couple of months.

Deciphering the runic on the arch was my next step to decoding the true history of Conviction Woods, and the moment I finally found it, an Assidian border patrol just had to be there—of course.

There was no doubt about it. The two of them had spotted me. I'd stepped past the 10-foot-wide path into Assidian territory where the arch stood, and they were headed straight toward me.

I backed up to Conviction Woods, safely passing beyond the aura of protection set on the trees. A faint shimmering aura of gold, green, and silver light flickered and shifted around the lanterns as I settled into Conviction's territory on the opposite side of the trail. Although it was a remarkably

visible barrier, many Assidians, especially new recruits, were stupid enough to break through it, no matter how many times their Stellarium higher-ups warned them.

The two patrollers were approaching, both wearing thick winter cloaks with fur hoods. The man wore a forest green embroidered with the Assidian emblem and Taurus glyph, while the woman flaunted an umber coat with the Virgo glyph.

"You saw her, didn't you?" said the Taurus man. "At the arch?"

"Yes," the Virgo woman responded. "She wouldn't have had time to run north or south on the East Trail."

"So... she went into Conviction Woods?"

"Not a chance. She wouldn't survive."

"Are you sure you saw a red cloak?"

"I'm certain, and I'm tired of you doubting my every word."

They couldn't have been older than twenty-five. Young and inexperienced was what the Assidian Stellarium looked to employ, an easy job that made a steady income, enough to provide a young adult enough to live. Conviction hired guards for the same purpose, though our border patrols were less necessary along the trails, as outsiders from different Unions would rarely volunteer themselves to wander into Conviction Woods.

"You're sure she went in there?" the Taurus asked again.

"Yes." She rolled her eyes. "Where else do you suppose she disappeared to?"

The two of them stood in front of the Woods, curiously staring at what they saw as a forest empty of occupants. I wasn't visible past the aura that shielded and hid any entity who could survive beyond the boundaries.

"She wouldn't survive," he repeated.

The Virgo crossed her arms. "I still think they made it up."

"Who? What?" He raised his brows. "Who made what up?"

"The Conviction Stellarium. They made up the whole 'Conviction Woods is deadly' thing to keep us out. Have you ever talked to someone who has actually seen a beast?"

"No, and that's because they don't survive when they see one." He shivered and took a step back. "I say we leave it. She's gone. We can hang out here for a bit in case she comes back."

"They trained us to stay out of Conviction Woods, but they never told us why. The border patrol trainers mentioned nothing about what the Woods are like. All they said is that they're dangerous."

"This isn't worth it for a raise. It's one girl. Even if we catch her, we probably won't get much from it."

"Not if she's a Scorpio. Her capture would cover us for months." Her determined eyes were set on the space where I stood. "I didn't hear any screams. We would've heard if she was attacked."

"This is absurd. I'm *not* going in there." The Taurus took another step back. "No way. Absolutely not. Even they won't go in there. Good luck, you're on your own."

"You're a coward. I won't go far."

They, as in Convictionists. The guy wasn't wrong—normally, the Woods didn't make exceptions for anyone, regardless of Union, despite being part of Conviction's territory.

But my family was proof that there were exceptions, somehow, someway, and I would find out why.

I stepped farther back into the Woods, ducking behind the trunk of a massive pine. Its deep sepia bark shimmered gold when my hand fell

atop its body. Sunlight filtered in green from the reflection of pine needles above, the forest floor covered in moss and shed cones from the hemlocks. Moisture clung to my skin with the humidity of the temperate rainforest.

Behind a nearby pine, a wolf laid idle, basking in a patch of cozy moss. Its nose twitched when it caught my scent, looking up to ensure I was familiar. Once I was approved, it rested its head back down on its paws, turning over on its side to warm its belly in the sunlight. I, too, enjoyed the peaceful hush of the Woods, the company of the unbothered creatures acquainted to my presence.

To anyone else, the Woods were a living hell amidst the land of Gardian.

The woman took a step beyond the lanterns, breaking through the aurora boundary. She met my eyes with a smile, her hand resting on a belt as she unsheathed a dagger.

My fingers traced over the half-moon necklace resting above my cloak. I snapped it off and shook the necklace, causing its transformation spell to activate. With a flash of pale blue light, it shifted into a short broadsword. Its deep ebony metal flared in the sunlight as I faced it toward her, grasping the red and gold handle.

Her eyes darted around, observing the tranquil forest around her. "So, it was all a lie."

I smiled, and she shook her head in bewilderment at the expressed emotion from a Scorpio. I wasn't concerned. She'd never dare to talk about what the Woods were about to unleash upon her, let alone try to return.

I waved at her. "Good luck. Hope you can run fast."

The sunlight waned. Shadows crept along the trees in tendrils and swallowed the golden hues. A sharp wind hushed the birdsong, brushing

along my shoulders. The inviting greens contorted, vines swallowing the forest floor in a sea of mossy sludge, while a fog curled around trunks.

The wolf stood as a shadow seeped into its body. Its yellow eyes blinked scarlet, a stare that was said to slice your soul in half, devouring you from the metaphysical before the physical. It stalked past me; the vines on the forest floor didn't tie themselves around my ankles; the shadows avoided my skin.

Blood oozed from the beast's maw when it unleashed a hungry snarl, its body reeking of putrid, rotting limbs. Panic flooded over the woman's face, and she looked to me with wide eyes, as if I could do anything about it.

"If I were you," I said, shaking my sword to reverse it back to my pendant, "I would turn back now."

In any other circumstance, she would've disregarded a Scorpio's warning. Some part of me found satisfaction in seeing the Assidians listen to my instruction when they stepped beyond the boundary of the Woods.

She turned her back to the beast and scrambled to the lanterns as the creature leapt forward, snapping at her leg. It merely missed as she broke through the aura and slammed against the dirt of the East Trail. The beast didn't follow her out, instead watching her with its piercing red eyes in case she crossed back over. For a few moments, both remained in a standstill, until the forest recognized the departure of its threat. The shadows sunk into the ground, golden hues washing over the trees in a glimmering wave.

The black fog melted off the wolf. It glanced back at my direction, and after determining that the Woods were clear of intruders, it trotted over to me. I knelt and stroked between its ears as it curiously gave me a

sniff-spection. It wagged its tail before it returned to the bed of moss, flopping back over. I must've been approved again.

Beyond the boundary, the Taurus was screaming at his colleague. Her dagger had been thrown aside. She sobbed, begging him to believe what she'd seen.

With a satisfied, guilty smile, I turned away from the East Trail, walking deeper into the Woods; there was no use in letting the day waste by attempting to wait for the Assidians to recover. The wolf, catching my movement, perked its ears and bounded after me to guide me home.

The forest understood how to defend me, and I was on the verge of rewriting its history.

CHAPTER 2

By the time I made it home, the Sun was lingering above the west horizon. Between the trees sat our house in a sandy clearing where trunks and foliage bent away from the old A-frame cabin. The wood logs were sun-stained, crumbling and barely held together by an aged enchantment set upon the foundations of the house years ago. Moss blanketed its walls and gave the entire clearing its earthy smell; though midwinter raged throughout the rest of Gardian, Conviction Woods kept its humid warmth year-round. Our parents found and restored the abandoned house in the Woods before Avia—my half-sister—and I were born. All four of us were immune to the Woods, and not a single one of us had any clue why.

Avia was on the porch, lying back with her legs dangling off the side of the platform. I rolled my eyes at the fact that she was wearing my black

pants again. Similar to the Assidian guards, Avia had a border patrol crest embroidered next to her Aries glyph on her orange coat, symbolizing her loyalty to guarding the Conviction-Assiduous border.

"Rieka." She glanced up with a smile, looking down at her watch. "Three hours late. What was it this time?"

"Ten miles out into the forest to the Assidian border. I had the pleasure of watching a Virgo border guard get chased out of the Woods by a beast."

I climbed the stairs to the door with a missing lock, each step creaking in its own tone. Without giving her time to respond, I kicked open the door to immediately look at the coatrack against the wall. My eyes caught to Dad's blue and tan Autarian long coat with a gold Cancer symbol—I smiled. He'd made it home in time. Dad's formal attire had taken my spot on the rack, so I ripped my cloak off my shoulders and threw it on the dusty couch that sat right next to the door.

"You walked twenty miles? Today, of all days?" Avia said as she followed me in. "What time did you get up?"

"Maybe if you didn't sleep like a rock, you would've heard me sneak out at 3 AM." I threw my bag down beside the pile of mud-smeared shoes and boots. "I'm perfectly fine. It's flat. I had a plan, and I've done way more."

There was barely a temperature change from the Woods to inside the house; though midwinter raged throughout the rest of Gardian, Conviction Woods kept its humid warmth all year long. Most houses in Gardian had an enchantment cast by ice mages to keep them cool in the summer; we never even needed one. Avia and I had grown up alongside the temperate humidity, and I was a little bit convinced that the moisture had seeped

into my skin over the years.

"One of these days, they're actually going to catch you, and no one will be there to bail you." Avia followed me in, her voice carrying through the hallway like an echo chamber—loud, distinctive, and most importantly, my sister's voice.

"They haven't yet. You look inviting." I nodded at her black clothing underneath her cloak, and her blonde hair plastered across her glistening forehead. "We have the Ceremony in a couple of hours, and you haven't even started to get ready. Something exciting must've happened at work, and you just have to tell your sister, right?"

"You look and smell like you jumped in a stagnant pond. You're lucky that Dad gave us water in this house, and you're even more lucky that I'll let you shower first." She smacked me on the arm. "Also, the contract says I'm not supposed to tell anyone about my work day, *including family.*"

"When have you ever listened to rules? It's almost like you were waiting for me to get home to tell me."

"How many laws have *you* broken today? And hello? The Code?" She gestured toward her face, then over at mine. "You're smiling."

"Yeah, okay. I'm not watching my emotions with you. Never have, never will. I don't care how close we are to the Ceremony."

"That's not what the law says."

The Scorpio Code recited itself in my head: *never show emotions, never befriend others, and never fall in love.*

After a moment of hesitation, I scoffed. "As if you're listening to the law more than I am."

Avia slumped over the table in the small, empty dining room near our front door, her head hung over the table as she rubbed her face. Underneath her hands were eyes downcast with concern that she was trying to

smother. Aries, the warrior, the fighter, taught to not show fear. Though not showing fear wasn't an official Code that the Aries Stellarium issued, it was held above Avia's shoulders with societal pressure. In that moment, for the first time in years, I saw the irresistible worry in the tears at the edges of her eyes. She wouldn't dare let them fall.

A guilt crept through me. If only I could listen and obey my Code as much as Avia inherently rarely feared. I had to break the silence before either of us cried.

"I found it, Avia."

She looked up quickly. "The arch? The *right* one?"

"The *right* one."

I reached down to unbutton my bag, pulling out a wrinkled map of Conviction Woods. Dad, Avia's father and my adoptive father, had drawn it for me years ago. The ink was fading from the sunlight it'd been exposed to while I explored the Woods. I placed it down on the table and slid it in front of Avia, tracing my index finger alongside the dotted border of Conviction and Assiduous, resting my finger on top of a mark I'd made.

"I thought it was going to be around here. That's where I was a couple of days ago." I barely moved my finger south. "But it was here. The writing across it was a combination of Driksaal and Rurian. It was different from the writing on the other arches I've seen."

"The fact that you found it is proof of your insanity," Avia said. "I've never been placed on the border around there. Most of the arches look the same to me anyway."

I tried to ignore her lack of excitement. Dad would've been much more enthusiastic about the discovery. "Where's he?"

"Dad? Probably at the Ceremony location already. Mom left a note on the door this morning. Did you..." She paused before she finished the

sentence to rub her face.

"What?"

"Did you even notice the note?"

I pursed my lips. "It was dark."

"Notes are there for you to read, Rieka." Avia paused, narrowing her eyes at me, contemplating whether or not to tell me about her day. I shut my mouth and stared at her. "Fine. The Aries Leader visited the border today."

"An Arctura was at the border?"

"Yes, weird stuff," she continued. "I feel like he should have more important things to do, like sitting in a fancy office or something."

The Aries Leader was a big deal, and she was trying to act nonchalant about it. Atlas Fulbright was one of the two Arcturas leading Gardian's entire Stellarium. He was perhaps the most influential governmental figure in Gardian, leading with the other Arctura, the Scorpio Leader.

Seconds after she spilled her secret, Avia's face burned with shame. Her body was quick to follow. I could feel her heat radiating from where I was sitting. As a fire mage, her skin burned at a higher temperature than the average human, fluctuating with the intensity of her emotions. Over the years, we'd paid for multiple pieces of furniture and clothing to be enchanted with fireproofing, just in case.

I focused back on my map, running my index finger across it. The only details were in the sections of Conviction Woods, and even then, there were many blank spots where my legs could not reach in a day or two. The other three-fourths of my map had the names of other territories written out—Societal, Assiduous, and Autarchic. Soon, I'd be able to detail the big mysterious splotches of untouched paper. Dad had left them blank when I

was young so I could expand the map as I grew older.

Avia tapped her fingers against the tabletop. "Can you shapeshift my dress for tonight?"

"I don't think you're going to give me a choice." I rose from the table with a sigh and made my way down the hallway. "I'm tired."

"Whose fault is that?" Avia sprang from her chair and bolted past me to my room. She opened the door, but hesitated before stepping in, and for good reason. "Oh, god, it's *literally* a warzone."

I'd accidentally left out some rusty wartime arrows. Polished and restored blades hung on twine covered the wall next to the door, a larger shield in the corner of the room. Scrolls littered the floor with historical accounts of all ages, runes and symbols I'd copied from books, overdue texts I probably should've returned to the library weeks ago, papers with scribbled charcoal symbols I'd traced or sketched from locations in the Woods. Stacks of books lined the walls. Most I'd read over the years, a few I hadn't gotten to yet. My most recent fixation was sitting in the circle of my mess on top of a wolf-fur rug in the middle of the room, papers detailing one of the locations in the War of the Rebalancing where a battle had taken place on the Conviction-Assiduous border near an ancient arch; the *right* arch.

A wooden box in the corner was full of smaller trinkets I found on the boundaries of the Woods and had to return to the Stellarium to keep my job as a training historian. Every Stellarium, regardless of the Union or sign, was hungry for any information to reverse the curse on the Woods. I only gave them the less-interesting items I found on the outer boundaries of the Woods. I was worlds ahead of their knowledge base on the forest; most of my artifacts were from within the Woods themselves, and they'd never know I had them—to their understanding, no one lived in the forest that was

supposed to kill anyone who stepped foot in it.

A few paper lanterns hung from the ceiling, lit with an undying enchanted flame. Spoken, enchanted words could extinguish them at night, but I enjoyed sleeping with the luminescence. There were many times I didn't fall asleep in or on my bed, but instead on the comfort of the fur carpet or the cool wood floor. I liked the floor.

"You're so much more of a mess than I am, and that's an impressive feat," Avia said. "How did you make this wreck of an organizational system worse than when I saw it two days ago?"

I shrugged. "I've got a specific order for things, and it works."

"I know, Rieka, trust me on that one."

"Look." I stepped over a pile of books to my circle, reaching for the scroll from the library. I handed it to Avia. "It detailed the battle on the border and recorded the arch in the records. Someone died underneath the arch in a skirmish, but hours later, their body had vanished, and they were found alive in the Hub. Said to have similar healing properties found on their wound to the healing pine sap collected from the trees leaning over the boundary of Conviction Woods."

"Some days, I'm convinced you're losing your mind."

"The next step is tracing the writing across the arch and seeing if I've seen the same writing anywhere else." I reached down to shuffle through papers to find a couple of my sketches of combinations of languages I couldn't read. "The fact that there's a mix of languages on the arch—it's older, much older than the other arches on the borders. Those all have Driksaal or Rurain, not a combination of the two."

"That's cool. I still need you to shapeshift my clothes."

I didn't acknowledge her, swallowing my irritation, and stepped over

a couple of stacks of books to reach the closet stocked with black dresses and shirts. We'd learned early on it would be easier and cheaper to buy low-quality clothing and have me shapeshift it into something of higher quality. I swung the door open, barely missing a pile of papers. I pulled out two worn dresses and threw them on top of my bed.

Avia didn't dare to step beyond the doorframe and into the mess of my disorganized order. "I want something mostly red, but with yellow swirls."

"I would've designed it just like that," I snapped, but then breathed in to remind myself that my mess of interests were mine, not hers, and I could only have her attention for so long until she wanted something from me.

I closed my eyes and focused all my power on the dress in front of me. I pictured what she wanted, exactly how she told me. It didn't take much for me to shapeshift the dress; I was used to the process. The shapeshifting light pooled from my hands, enclosing the fabric in a white glow until all traces of the black were gone. Red and yellow spread across the glow like the flow of a stream, and with one last bright glow, it was finished. I took a minute to regain my composure, leaning over my bed as my heart raced. My hands burned from the magic. With a shaky breath, I threw the dress toward her.

"Thanks. Don't exhaust yourself for yours." She caught it and left the room. "And for my sake, go take a shower after you're done with it."

I shooed her out focusing on the other black dress, using the same process of magic on it, but with far less effort. When I opened my eyes, my simple ombre black and red dress was in front of me, Scorpio's colors. I gasped this time, sitting down on my bed as my vision crackled and black-

ened.

Shapeshifting had never been easy for me. Compared to Avia's fire magic, my power was harmless and somewhat weak. I had a few substances I'd learned how to morph over the years. Fabric, sand, and metal were the textures I could—barely—change. It still managed to save us the effort of buying more clothes, especially with Mom's shapeshifting, too.

I slipped into my travel clothes again, draping my enchanted necklace over my head. On the way out of my room, I tripped on a book and, to avoid falling onto rusty arrows, crashed into the wall instead. I threw my hands out to stabilize myself as I came nose-to-nose with the collection of sharpened knives on the wall. In the reflection of a blade, my one red, one gold eye returned my gaze. The longer dagger underneath it directly aligned with the scar across the middle of my neck, a wound without an origin, a mark of a blade I couldn't remember being cut by. I gently brushed my thumb against the fully healed wound.

"I have been telling you for *days* that this is unsafe, Rieka," Avia snapped as she leaned against the doorframe. I flinched at her loud voice. "And right before the Ceremony, too? Imagine if you showed up with a fresh cut in your neck. They would think that you'd just been punished for breaking the Code. On the same day they start seriously holding the Code against you."

I couldn't look her in the eyes. "I'm fine, Avia."

"You almost weren't. Get out of this battlefield and go take a shower. Now."

"How much time do I have?"

"The Ceremony isn't actually that far away. Mom told me yesterday that it's at the stage near the outskirts of the Hub, the one that's slightly

down the East Trail. The weird location," she said. "It's the one that you go twenty minutes or so south on the Trail from the Hub. We've both passed it before."

"The part of the East Trail that curves around the Hub a bit?"

"Yup, that one. Another Convictionist is attending."

I carefully stepped back to avoid the arrows on the floor. "Must live in the southern Convictionist regions of the Hub?"

"A guy and his family." She held her forehead as if she was trying to remember the facts. "That's what I was told by a couple of other Aries. Rumor goes around. Heard he's a year older than me. Libra."

"He's a year older?" I raised my brows. "Yeah, right. You already tested the system by delaying your own Ceremony, you were 'busy' with work, I'd doubt that someone gets away with it for two years. Did your friends tell you this?"

"They were serious, I promise." She grinned. "Aries, we always tell the truth."

Not even a week ago, Avia's fellow guards had lied and tricked her into walking into a Pisces-owned clothing shop in the Hub while she was wearing her mud-covered border guard uniform. It hadn't gone well.

"I guess we'll find out who's right," I said. "It all sounds suspicious to me."

"Ah, yes, Rieka-the-Investigator-of-all-things."

"Do you blame me for questioning what your friends tell you?"

Avia pointed toward the bathroom to avoid answering. "Rieka. Shower. Go."

I grumbled at her, avoiding obstacles on my way to the hallway. I paused to glance back at Avia when she didn't snap back at my complaining

noises.

Her smile faltered for a second as she gestured toward her face. "Don't do anything stupid with the emotions. Remember the Code."